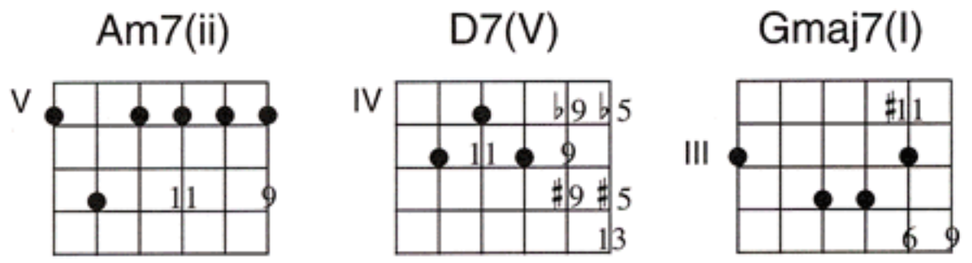
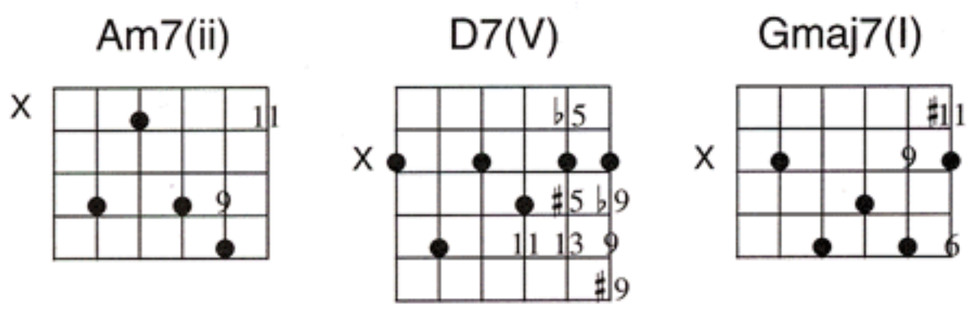
Shortcuts To Reading Chord Charts

BY CHRIS STANDRING

Ex. 1a



Ex. 1b



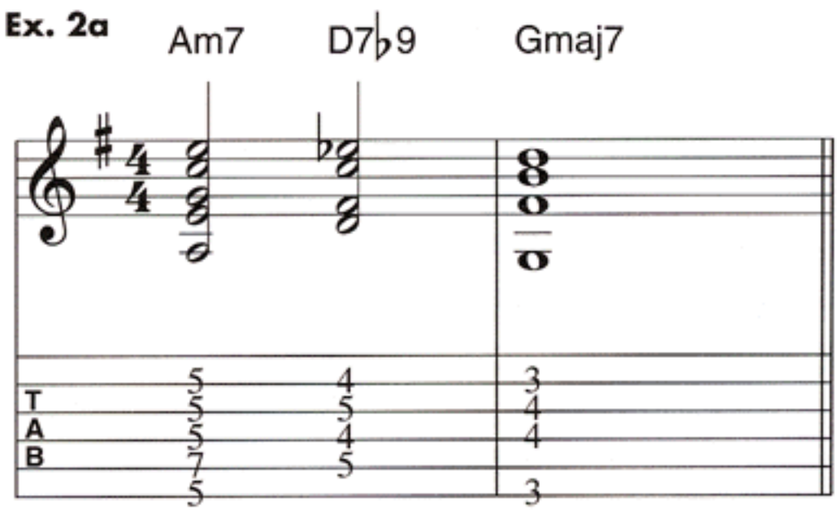
SIGHT-READING CHORD CHARTS is a big part of studio work. On a typical movie, TV, or commercial date, you're expected to create a solid rhythm part from a page of chord symbols. This chart is likely to contain altered and extended harmony. If you panic at the sight of *D7♭5♭9*, don't worry. There's a logical way to decode and finger the uptown chords you'll encounter in a session.

The key is to master three basic chord types: minor 7, dominant 7, and major 7. You need to know two *forms* for each type: one with its root on the sixth string, the other on the fifth string. Ex. 1 contains two ii-V-I progressions. The first (a) starts with a sixth-string-root *Am7*, goes to a fifth-string-root *D7*, and ends with a sixth-string-root *Gmaj7*. The second (b) reverses the pattern: *Am7* with its root on the fifth string, *D7* with its root on the sixth string, and *Gmaj7* with its root on the fifth string. Easy.

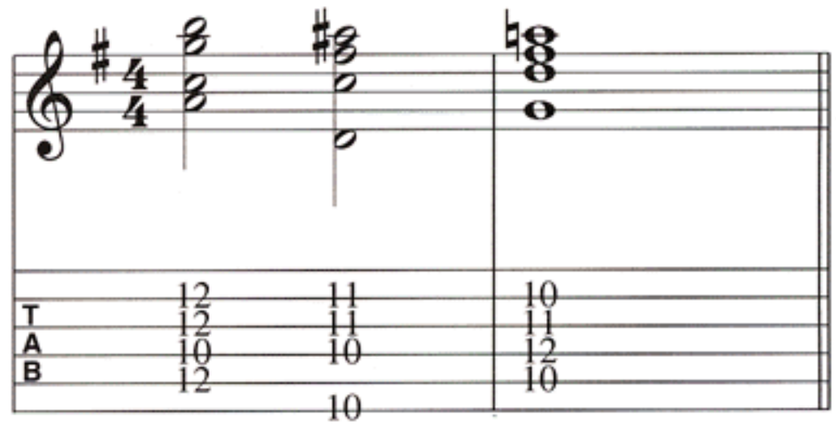
Once you know the basic forms, learn the various extensions and alterations associated with each shape, as shown in Ex. 1. Executing an extended or altered chord is a simple matter of adding these notes—the ♭9, ♯9, ♭5, ♯5, 11, or 13—to the appropriate form. It's fast and musical to think this way. Forget memorizing scores of seemingly unrelated grips. Burn your chord dictionary!

Practice ii-V-I patterns with selected extensions and alterations in all keys. Examples 2a-2d will get you started. First play the progressions as written, then work through the cycle of fifths. Alternate between the ii-V-I forms with their respective sixth- and fifth-string roots. Choose the most convenient one for a given key and location. Wherever you are in the cycle, you shouldn't have to leap about the fretboard. The right fingering will be close at hand.

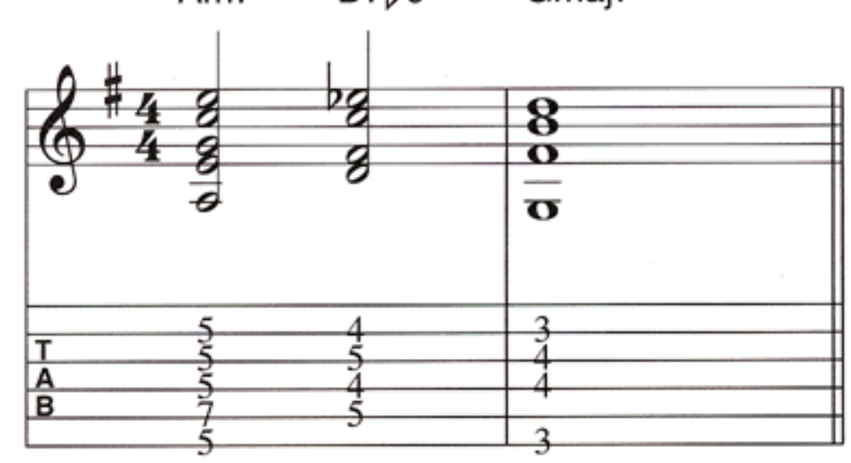
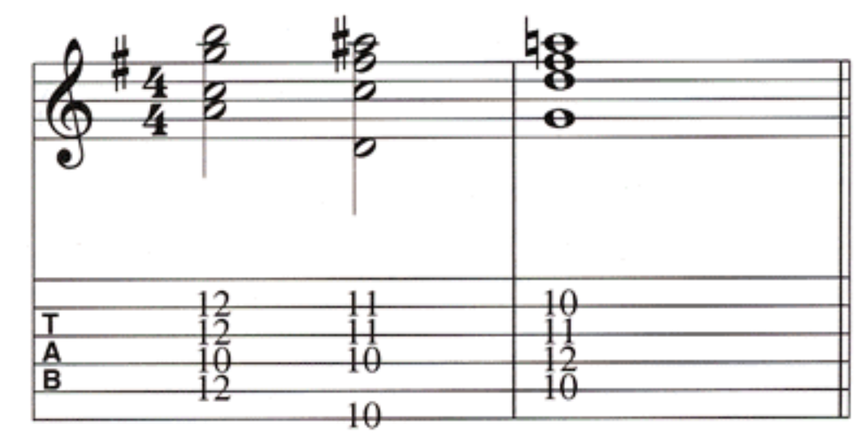
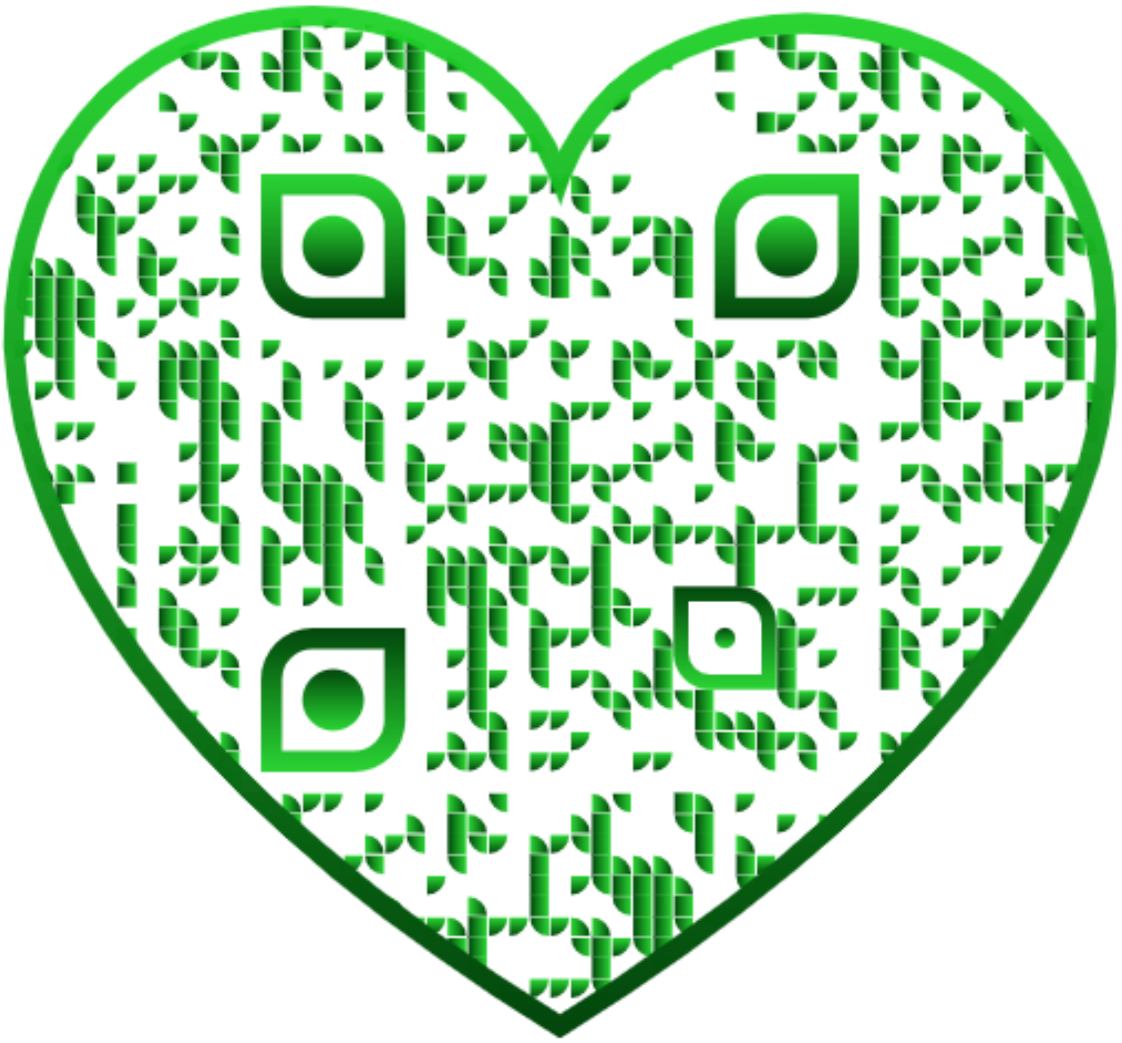
Ex. 2a Am7 D7♭9 Gmaj7



Ex. 2b Am9 D7♯5 Gmaj9



Ex. 2c Am7 D7♭9 Gmaj7



Ex. 2d Am9 D7♯5 Gmaj9